

The life and work of J. Obrebski in context

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Jozef Obrebski (1905-1967) studied ethnography and ethnology with Kazimierz Moszynski and Kazimierz Nitsch in Krakow and social anthropology with Bronislaw Malinowski in London. From 1929 to 1932 he conducted ethnographic studies in Bulgaria and in the Yugoslav region of Vardarska Makedonia. The most important part of his fieldwork took place in 1932 at the small village of Volche which is located 45 kms to the South of Skopje, 6 hours walking distance SE of Gostivar. This area is today located 120 kms North of the Greek borders. Obrebski was the first PhD student of B. Malinowski at LSE. They became close friends and Obrebski was actively involved in promoting Malinowski's work among sociologists, ethnologists and folklorists in Poland and other central European academic communities.

During his fieldwork at Volche Obrebski strictly followed Malinowski's fieldwork methods. This becomes evident from his fieldnotes, from the preparations he did for his trips and even from the available photographs where he is presented dressed in a typical central European upper class style, eating alone, always carrying a notebook and a camera (Agelopoulos, personal communication). Obrebski had a glass-camera with him and took hundreds of photos, most of them are today available in his archive. He remained for more than 12 months in the area of Volche without any communication with his tutors back home. As a result, the Polish authorities officially asked the University of Skopje to search for Obrebski. Finally, a platoon of the local police forces located Obrebski and informed the Polish authorities (Risteski, personal communication). Volche was for Obrebski 'an island in the ocean'. This ocean was not the Pacific but the post-Ottoman Balkans.

After completing his work in Volche, he did independent work in Warsaw, where in 1934-1946 he was active among both sociologists and ethnologists. Until 1939 Obrebski worked in the Institute for the Study on Nationalities and under its auspices conducted ethno-sociological field work in the Polesie region. He was also Vice-director of the National Institute for Rural Culture where he focused research on peasant universities, peasant memoirs, and village migration. Obrebski was active in the Polish Sociological Institute and became editor-in-chief of the Sociological Library, as well as co-editor of *Przegląd Socjologiczny*. He lectured on sociology at the Free University in Warsaw and Lodz. In 1940-1944, he was active in clandestine structures of academic and scholarly life in Warsaw under the Nazi occupation. After World War II Obrebski first headed the Chair of Ethnology of Lodz University, but continued his career in Warsaw. In 1946 he was employed at the Warsaw University and taught ethnology at its Humanistic Faculty. But soon he left Poland permanently; this stage in his career began with guest lectures in the U.K., continued with field work in Jamaica and subsequent work for the United Nations in New York, where he spent the final twenty years of his life. The only Warsaw (and Polish) institution with which he established contacts in the later period (in 1960) was the Polish Sociological Society.

Very few references to his work exist in the work of other scholars of his era. Sanders, for example, who did fieldwork in an area 200 Kms to the East of Volche in the mid 1930s does not make any references to Obrebski's work (Sanders 1936, 1939). Due to his limited publications but also due to the fact that his field-site (SE Europe) was not

considered as a valid anthropological milieu until the 1970s, his contribution had been largely ignored. Obrebski is not mentioned in review papers or edited volumes on Mediterranean anthropology neither on similar reviews of Eastern European anthropology. Halpern (1983, 2003) and Engelking (2003, 2004, 2006a, 2006b) have attempted to present his contribution but this is only referred to a limited number of publications outside Warsaw and Skopje.

Obrebski's work is heavily influenced by Malinowski's functionalism theoretical perspectives. What is more interesting is how such theoretical perspectives lead to the construction of otherness in the Balkan and the European context of Volche. In his writings Obrebski reproduces a typical stereotypical dichotomy between 'Traditional' and 'Modern' societies. Without any Balkanist orientation Obrebski offers an original perception of European 'primitives' and their meeting with modernity.